SUMMARY. This article focuses on the reception in Israel of Sugihara Chiune, a Japanese diplomat who served in Kaunas in 1939-40 and granted transit visa to several thousands of refugees, mostly Jews. The article explains the mechanisms that influenced the recognition of Sugihara in Yad Vashem during a 16-year hiatus since his name first reached this institution. It also argues that the key for the reception of Sugihara in Israel was his recognition by Yad Vashem as a Righteous Among the Nations. Once this recognition was made, it allowed further tokens of recognition that affected his status overseas too.

KEYWORDS: Sugihara Chiune, World War II, Holocaust, visa granting, Jewish refugees, Yad Vashem.

The memory of the Holocaust in Israel is closely related to Yad Vashem. Founded in 1953 by the Israeli parliament (Knesset) and located in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem is an official institution of the State of Israel charged with the commemoration of the Holocaust. Alongside the commemoration of the victims, a core goal of Yad Vashem’s founders was the recognition of Gentiles who risked their lives while saving Jews from the ongoing genocide during the Holocaust. By doing so, it sought to form a moral example and offer role models for the generations to come of people acting “in stark contrast to the mainstream of indifference and hostility that prevailed in the darkest time of history.”1 In this respect, Yad Vashem differs from other institutions of Holocaust commemoration in Israel and elsewhere, despite not being the only venue for recognition, as the case of the German industrialist Oskar Schindler suggests. Nonetheless, individuals who were involved in assisting Jews during the war and remained relatively unknown afterwards generally require Yad Vashem’s official approval to become internationally recognized for their deeds.

For this specific purpose, Yad Vashem created the designation of the Righteous Among the Nations and formed a commission headed by a Justice of the Supreme Court of Israel in 1963 to scrutinize applications for the title, study all relevant

documentation, and then determine whether the case meets four criteria. The first criterion is the rescuer’s active involvement in saving one or several Jews from the threat of death or deportation to the death camps. The second criterion is the risk to the rescuer’s life, liberty or position. The third is the rescuer’s initial motivation that bore the intention to help persecuted Jews, rather than payment or any other reward, such as the saved person’s religious conversion, the adoption of a child, etc. The fourth is the existence of one or more testimonies from those who were helped, or at least unequivocal documentation establishing the nature of the rescue and its circumstances. In addition, only a Jewish party can put a nomination forward and the assistance has to be repeated and/or substantial. People who meet all four criteria and a few other pre-conditions are awarded the title “Righteous Among the Nations.” In addition, they receive a specially minted medal, as well as a certificate of honour, and granted a privilege of having their names added to the Wall of Honour in the Garden of the Righteous at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

With Yad Vashem and its Righteous among the Nations title in mind, it is not surprising that much of the memory of Sugihara Chiune in Israel is associated with this institution, first as a recognizing body and then as a hall of commemoration. There is little doubt that Sugihara’s actions, and to lesser extent his name, were widely known among the people to whom he had granted visas. However, it took several years from the time when the Righteous among the Nation commission was established until Sugihara was nominated to receive the title for the first time. In early 1968, Jehoshua Nishri (1919–1991), the economic attaché to the Israeli Embassy in Tokyo located Sugihara at his home in Fujisawa, in the vicinity of Yokohama, and contacted him. The Polish-born Nishri was one of those who were granted Japanese transit visas in Kaunas in 1940. A little later, on 15 July 1968, Yad Vashem received a letter from the Asia and Oceania Section of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs mentioning Sugihara Sempo, who, it was stated, was the consul in Kaunas, Lithuania, in the 1940-41 and by issuing Japanese transit visas saved thousands of Jews, mostly refugees from Poland.

The letter to Yad Vashem contained correspondence that originated in Poland. A year earlier, a researcher of the Polish resistance movements named Roman Korab-Zebryk approached the Japanese embassy in Poland with enquiries concerning Sugihara’s actions, his assistance to the Polish underground and his issuance of many transit visas to Polish subjects, who could use them to go to Japan via the Soviet Union and reach safe places. Four months later, Korab-Zebryk received a reply from Sugihara himself with a detailed memoir of his experience. The letter from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs added that Sugihara struck them with his sincerity and that the Israeli Ambassador to Tokyo, Moshe Bartur (1919–1985),
a Polish-born diplomat who served in Tokyo between 1966–1972, considered his story fully persuasive. In conclusion, the letter contained a request to refer Sugihara’s case to the Commission’s deliberation in order to determine what kind of recognition the State of Israel will be willing to make for the person and which practical measures should be carried out accordingly.

Under the chairmanship of Supreme Court justice Moshe Landau (1912–2011), the Commission examining the Sugihara file was not impressed. There was no doubt that the Japanese diplomat had in fact granted visas and that this act, along with many other factors, eventually facilitated, the process of saving the lives of a large number of Polish Jewish refugees. Nonetheless, according to the information received by the Commission, Sugihara did not risk his life or his position carrying the aforementioned activities. This means in essence that he did not differ much from quite a number of consuls, among which there are even some representatives of Nazi Germany, who provided Jews with visas before the Final Solution was enacted, and thus indirectly and unknowingly helped to save their lives. For this reason, the Commission decided not to grant Sugihara the Righteous Among the Nations title, but nonetheless invited him to Jerusalem. Indeed, on 18 December 1969 Sugihara visited Yad Vashem and was awarded a certificate of recognition. Moreover, his youngest son, 19-year-old Nobuki, received a scholarship for studies in Jerusalem and landed in Israel in late August 1968.

The Sugihara file had to wait for another 15 years. The breakthrough in his case occurred once a copy of a documentary film on his deeds was handed to the Israeli embassy in Tokyo. After watching the film, ambassador Amnon Ben Yohanan and his assistants were of the opinion that Sugihara had certainly helped Jews and that a tribute to his deed could contribute to the improvement of Israel’s feeble image in Japan that emerged as a result of the Lebanon War and the Sabra and Shatila massacre in Beirut a year earlier. Having been in contact with Sugihara since 1968 and aware of his deteriorating health, the embassy staff were looking for a means to settle Sugihara’s inconclusive case in Yad Vashem. In a letter sent in late 1983 from the embassy to the Diaspora (Tfusot) Section—a section charged with maintaining relations with Jewish communities around the world at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jerusalem, the public relations attaché, Mr Eitan Margalit, urged the verification of Sugihara’s story. Quick action, he explained, would allow Yad Vashem to grant Sugihara the title of Righteous among the Nations and thus enable the embassy to grant him the title at the time of the documentary broadcast on Japanese TV. Margalit mentioned the speaker of Israel’s Parliament (Knesset) at the time, Menahem Savidor (1917–1988) and the ex-Minister of Religious Affairs, Dr. Zerach Warhaftig (1906–2002), both grantees of Sugihara’s visas as possible witnesses to the case.
By the time the letter left Japan, the film had already been broadcast. Margalit was apparently either mistaken or was simply using the film as a pretext for prompting Yad Vashem to act. Nonetheless, his letter set a new process in motion. Initially, the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous at Yad Vashem was not moved by the new information from Tokyo, since it presented no new evidence that could alter its earlier decision. At this stage, Ms Gita Amipaz (1923–2005), a senior assistant at the Diaspora Section and a Polish-born Holocaust survivor, took charge of the case. She approached Warhaftig, who in response to her inquiry stated that he had been a chair of the committee for (Jewish) refugees in Kaunas (Kovno) and it was within that capacity that he was in contact with the Japanese Consul general, Sugihara, who during a year—from the end of 1940 to the end of 1941 (sic)—provided several thousands of transit visas to Jews who had entry visas to Curaçao given to them by the Dutch consul in Kovno. Warhaftig also mentioned Savidor as one of those who had received a visa to Japan. Subsequently, Amipaz approached Savidor’s office and was told that he was too busy to talk personally, but received confirmation that he had been saved by Sugihara and a suggestion to talk to Warhaftig.

For an expert testimony, Amipaz approached Prof. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky (1924–2015), a scholar in the field of Comparative Religion at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem who had had a long-standing interest in Japan. Werblowsky, like Warhaftig, was of the opinion, Amipaz wrote, that Sugihara deserved recognition for his deed and that although he did not risk his life, there was no doubt he had jeopardized his position. One need not forget, she added, that Japan concluded an alliance with Germany as early as 1936. Sugihara’s deed thus was against the will of the Nazis. Amipaz also quoted Werblowsky’s words about a similar incident that took place during that period: The Japanese Consul in Shanghai, he wrote, warned the city’s Jews about a plot against them. For that felony he was tried and served a sentence in jail. One may learn from this case that Sugihara definitely risked himself or at least his position. We all know what happened to the Portuguese consul in Bordeaux, France. Amipaz concluded her letter to Yad Vashem, sent on 26 January 1984, with a suggestion that Sugihara’s case should be brought to the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous, and a request that, if not granted a medal and a tree planting, he should at least be awarded a certificate of recognition.

A week later, the indefatigable Amipaz sent Yad Vashem another letter in which she added some details provided by Werblowsky. Sugihara, noted the latter scholar, approached his superiors in Tokyo and asked for permission to issue transit visas to the Jews. The response was negative. He sent another telegram to Tokyo and again received a negative reply and an explicit instruction not to inquire again since the
decision is final. Notwithstanding this reply and hoping that the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs would not notice it, [Sugihara] issued more than 6,000 (six thousand) transit visas to Jews. It seems that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Weblow-sky concluded, did not notice this indeed. Amipaz concluded that Werblowsky’s findings evidently supported her proposal for bringing Sugihara’s case before the Commission.

In mid-February 1984, Dr. Moshe Bejski (1921–2007), a Supreme Court judge and the chair of the Righteous Commission from 1970 to 1995, penned a few remarks on Amipaz’s first letter. A Polish-born Holocaust survivor, who was on Oskar Schindler’s list, Bejski was cautious but favourably inclined. The case, he wrote, raises quite a few problems: both the question of risk and the question of year of activity (1940–1941), and also the issue of transit visas. In conclusion, Bejski suggested the appointment of a referee that would interview Warhaftig and Savidor, leaf through Warhaftig’s forthcoming book, watch the movie, and form an opinion that would be presented to the Commission. With respect to Amipaz’s second letter, Bejski added that the matter requires a comprehensive inquiry and a gathering of materials. He asked that a person that would recommend Sugihara should be found urgently and that the file should be brought for deliberation in the committee as soon as all the preparations were complete.

Behind the scenes there was Zerach Warhaftig, who played a major role in promoting Sugihara’s nomination. A senior member of the National Religious Party and the Minister of Religious Affairs for 13 years (1961–1974), the 78-year-old Warhaftig was still influential and powerful. He had retired from the Knesset three years earlier and had an autobiography in press by early 1984. Published in March of the year by none other than Yad Vashem, the book portrayed Warhaftig’s lifelong activities and placed him at the centre of the rescue efforts in Lithuania and Japan. Although vital to the refugees’ departure from Lithuania, Sugihara’s visas were a marginal element in Warhaftig’s communal efforts in Kaunas, let alone in his earlier Zionist and public activity in Poland. And yet, the visas confirmed Warhaftig’s central position as the saviour of the Polish Jewish refugees in Lithuania and provided an account of his own survival during the Holocaust, together with his wife and young son, and for his activity in Japan. Warhaftig’s support in the Sugihara case is not documented in Yad Vashem files, but his lobbying for Sugihara is indisputable.

A substantial part of this support can also be found in his book. Warhaftig devoted more than half of his book to the rescue of the Polish Jewish refugees from Lithuania and to their path to safe haven via Japan. He was highly aware of the questions of motive and risk and their relevance to Yad Vashem’s recognition.
Within this context, he wrote explicitly that the Dutch honorary consul in Kaunas Jan Zwartendijk (1896–1976), much like his colleague in Stockholm, the Dutch honorary consul-general A. M. de Jong, did a good humanitarian act but without taking a [personal] risk. As representatives of the Dutch government-in-exile, he speculated, they may have better understood the fate of refugees. In addition, they were not under the threat of discipline from a stable government on its own land. [Thus] each consul could do as he wished. Warhaftig had also voiced this opinion earlier, when he was consulted by the Commission during its deliberations with regard to Jan Zwartendijk in 1977. This said, he objected the opinion that the Dutch consuls granted visas for the sake of profit. With regard to Sugihara Warhaftig was not as decisive, although he did not claim that the Japanese consul risked himself. In fact, in a conversation the two conducted in Jerusalem in 1969, Sugihara explained to him that as long as he acted within his legal authority, he was willing to help the refugees. Still, Warhaftig was convinced that Sugihara had decided to act in good faith, that, being a liberal person, he did not like the Nazi Germans, and did not support the Japanese–German alliance.

With the new materials at hand, along with the unwavering support of Dr. Warhaftig, Knesset speaker Savidor, Prof. Werblowsky, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sugihara’s case appeared in a different light than it had been 16 years earlier. Not only was the issue of personal risk resolved suddenly, but the entire act of granting transit visas attained a larger dimension. At that juncture, the old and sick Sugihara could provide the poor Israeli-Japanese relations an uplift of positive public image without breaking the strict criteria Yad Vashem had set for recognizing a Righteous among the Nations. Hence, in late 1984, the Commission, although not unanimously, decided to grant Sugihara the title “Righteous Among the Nations.”

Due to his fragile health Sugihara could not come to Yad Vashem therefore, instead, the ceremony was held at the Israeli Ambassador’s residence in Tokyo on 18 January 1985. The embassy’s report emphasized the broad exposure that the event received in the Japanese media. In subsequent years, Sugihara’s name became known to the Israeli public to the extent that he is currently widely known as the Japanese consul who saved 6,000 Jews from the Holocaust. Apart from a tree planted in his honour at Yad Vashem, and a stamp was issued in his honour by the Israeli postal authority in 1998 as part of a series of five stamps on diplomats who saved Jews during the Holocaust. Six years later, in 2004, the Israel Coins and Medals Corporation coined silver and bronze medals in his honour. The text that accompanies the medals emphasizes Sugihara’s disobedience: “Sugihara approached Tokyo three times and asked to issue visas and was refused every time. The samurai tradition in which he was brought up and his liberal and human-loving
character made him ignore the instructions of his government and risk his life, his future and his family by acting according to his conscience. For 29 days, he and his wife sat for hours and hours and issued transit visas to the point of breakdown … He paid for these acts by losing a diplomatic career which was dear to him. [Nevertheless] more than 40,000 Jews owe their lives to the Sugiharas.”

Later on, Sugihara was honoured in additional ways too. Among other things, the municipality of Tel Aviv named a street in his honour in the southernmost and oldest part of Jaffa, and in June 2016, the municipality of Netanya also named a street after Sugihara. In addition, thousands of Israelis become acquainted with the story of Sugihara when they visit Japan. In recent years, the Sugihara Museum in Yaotsu has become an almost compulsory stop for Israeli tour groups in Japan.

All in all, it is evident that the actions and goodwill of a handful of individuals were instrumental in pushing forward the nomination of Sugihara Chiune for the Righteous Among the Nations title in 1984 after having been stuck in a stalemate for 16 years. Without their involvement, Sugihara would not have been awarded the title. The recognition granted by Yad Vashem was the starting point for a person’s public recognition in Israel, and is largely an essential condition for such a recognition, unless one benefits from very broad and favorable media coverage, as was the case with Oskar Schindler. One may also note the transnational character of such recognition, given that the sequence of events that prompted Yad Vashem to reconsider the Sugihara file began with a documentary film in Japan. The Yad Vashem’s recognition, in turn, was the trigger for major commemoration activities in Japan, most notably the first book on Sugihara, written by Shino Teruhisa in 1988, the subsequent publication of a book by Sugihara’s widow, Yukiko, two years later and the subsequent construction of a memorial park and museum in the town of Yaotsu. These and other commemoration activities stimulated similar actions in Lithuania, Poland and the United States, which, in turn, inspired further commemoration efforts and the bestowal of honours in Israel and Japan.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


SANTRAUKA. Straipsnyje pristatomas Chiune’ės Sugiharos, Japonijos diplomato, tarnavusio Kaune 1939–1940 m. ir išdavusio keletą tūkstančių tranzitinių vizų pabėgėliams, daugiausia žydams, vaizdžius Izraelyje. Analizuojamas mechanizmas ir procesas, kaip Sugiharai Yad Vashemo buvo suteiktas Pasaulio tautų teisėjo vardas, praėjus 16 metų tylos nuo to momento, kai diplomato kandidatūra pirmą kartą buvo pateikta šiai institucijai. Tai savo ruožtu tapo svarbiausiu Sugiharos pripažinimo Izraelyje faktoriumi. Šis pripažinimas Izraelyje tapo sektinu pavydžiu, paveikusiu Sugiharos vaizdą ir statusą kitose šalyse.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: Chiune Sugihara, Antrasis pasaulinis karas, vizų išdavimas, žydų pabėgėliai, Yad Vashem.